



Back injuries on the road: How to prevent them, how to heal them

by Kelly Heavey

Back injuries on the job account for one-fourth of workman's comp claims, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, and four out of five people will experience sharp or aching back pain at some point in their lives whether it's work-related or not. The pain can build up from day-to-day lifting, continuous improper posture, or it can be the result of one sudden incident. Regardless of how or when it happens, daily driving can take its toll on your spine without proper precautions. Here's a look at typical causes of back pain and what you can do about it on the road and at home.

What causes back pain?

Many factors increase the chances for back injury. Some examples are: age, fitness level, diet, heredity, race, cigarette smoking, and occupational risks. As a transit driver, occupational risks include assisting passengers in wheelchairs into tight spaces on a van or a bus and driving for long periods of time without breaks.

How can I prevent it?

Lifting improperly while assisting any passenger can be extremely harmful to your back, so you may want to consider taking these precautions: Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and squat down to lift with your knees, keep your neck aligned with your back when you look down, don't bend at your waist when lifting, and keep the weight as close to your body as possible. Your

Back Stretches

General advice: Hold stretches for about six seconds, release for six. Repeat five times, two or three times a day.

Stretch #1. Lie on your back. Press knees into chest, holding your shinbones (or the back of your thighs) with your hands. Release and repeat.



Stretch #2. Lie on your back with arms stretched out, perpendicular to your body. While turning your head to look at your right hand, pull your right knee close to your chest and then try to touch it to the ground on the left side of your body. Repeat on left side.



Stretch #3. Rest on hands and knees. Slowly dip your back, keeping head up and chin out. Then slowly arch your back, pulling chin to chest. Repeat.



Photos by Kelly Heavey

sturdy support will help a passenger transition smoothly on and off the bus and it will keep your own back protected at the same time.

For those long stretches of driving, relieve tense muscles and refresh yourself by taking a 15 minute break every two hours. Make sure to stretch and change positions in these breaks. This is recommended by the Department for Transport and the Driving Standards Agency of the United

Kingdom in their report, *The Highway Code*.

A recent study from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy called *Take the Pain out of Driving* reports that more than half of the business drivers surveyed have suffered from back pain in the past 12 months. The study lists back-saving strategies specifically for drivers compiled in an *Initial Driving Position and Posture Guide*. It lists eight pre-

ventative steps for adjusting the driver's seat, beginning from when you initially sit down to drive. The information is detailed and specific.

Protect your back and prevent slouching with an adjustable lumbar roll (or you can use a rolled up towel) placed in the small of your back. Also, if you move the driver's seat as close as you can comfortably get to the steering wheel—while still maintaining a safe 10 inches between your breastbone and the steering wheel as recommended for air bag safety by the Insurance Information Institute—the hollow of your back will be better supported.

When you assist passengers to their seats, face your entire body towards them. This will help you to avoid twisting your back in an awkward position.

Recovering from back pain

If you experience back pain, an easy at-home remedy is to apply cold and heat to the area. For the first few days, gently press an ice pack or a frozen bag of vegetables wrapped in a towel against the area for 20-minute periods several times a day. A few days later, begin applying heat to the area to stimulate blood flow.

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) recommends resting for no more than two days when recovering from back pain, because physical

activity is a good way to help your muscles recover. If the pain does not subside after 72 hours, NINDS recommends seeking medical attention.

Besides taking on-the-job precautions to prevent back pain, consider making positive lifestyle choices. Exercise regularly with three 30-minute cardio sections every week. Walking is a good option. Don't pile all of your workouts into a few days,

Take the pain out of driving by taking care of yourself and your back.

however, because over-exercising in spurts can harm you in the end when your muscles aren't used to all the work. Stretch throughout the day whenever your muscles feel tense (see recommended back stretches on the previous page.) Make sure your diet includes enough calcium and vitamin D to build stronger bones (think leafy vegetables, dairy products, and fish.)

A transit driver is always on the move! Take good care of your back while you care for your riders. There isn't one surefire strategy for that, except to be healthy in as many areas of your life as you can. Besides being mindful of proper lifting techniques, remember to take a few minutes to stretch throughout the day, and eat healthily to maintain your strength. ▲

Sources on back pain:

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke *Lower Back Pain Fact Sheet*, www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/backpain/detail_backpain.htm

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy's article, *Take the Pain out of Driving*, www.csp.org.uk

Insurance Information Institute: *Air Bag Safety*, <http://www.iii.org/individuals/auto/lifesaving/airbags/>

U.S. Department of Labor report found at: <http://www.pp.okstate.edu/ehs/training/oshaback.htm>

U.K. Department for Transport, Driving Standards Agency. *The Highway Code*. Stationary Office, May 2004. <http://www.highwaycode.gov.uk/>

Stretches found at <http://tms.ecol.net/fitness/backstr.htm>